



Women Create Their Own Paths to Health

The familiar proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” is useful when thinking about women’s health in Tennessee.

According to Tennessee Department of Health data, the top three causes of death for women residents of Tennessee are **heart disease**, **cancer** and **stroke**. In 2004, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 8,022 women died of heart disease, 6,240 died from cancer, and 2,404 died from stroke in the state.

Death rates for heart disease and stroke are considerably higher in the Southeastern states than in the rest of the country. The good news is there are simple steps women can take to improve their health and lower the chance of dying from these and other diseases. The important thing is to begin with that critical first step.

In fact, there are many first steps that a woman can take to lower her individual risk of disease, from having a screening test to walking more or taking the stairs to including fruits and vegetables in her diet. This seems like a "common sense" approach to improving health, but women need to be reminded that developing healthy habits occurs one step at a time, one day at a time, and certainly, one woman at a time.

It can be overwhelming to hear messages calling for major changes like: ‘lose weight,’ ‘eat nutritional foods,’ or ‘avoid alcohol and illegal drugs.’ It is more realistic to begin with steps like ‘walk, don’t ride,’ ‘plan an evening out that’s alcohol-free,’ ‘take the stairs,’ or ‘skip the soft drinks, drink water instead.’ These are just a few examples.

Women tend to be the caretakers in our society – of children, spouses, parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors – often caring for others before themselves. As a result, many women do not get the preventive health tests they need. Tests like mammograms for breast cancer, pap smears for cervical cancer, or blood pressure and cholesterol screening can save lives. Another simple step to improve health: make an appointment for a check-up.